



“DO YOU HEAR  
THE PEOPLE SIGN?  
SIGNING FOR  
US TO SEE.”

## **The Digital Transformation and the Sign Language in the MENA Region**

By Khadija Hamouchi for DAN

At the tender age of one, **Dr Hussein Ismail** lost his hearing capacity due to Meningitis. The now co-founder of the Learning Center for the Deaf had managed to turn that event into the most potent advocacy movement for deaf citizens in Lebanon.

At the dawn of the civil war, Dr Hussein travelled to The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, where he achieved his higher education, all the way to a doctorate, a rare accomplishment for a deaf community member in the Arab world.

Coming back to Lebanon in 1999, he vowed to scale the opportunities he sought for himself to his community. Armed with patience and perseverance, he endeavours to provide one equal chance for each to offer society a productive deaf citizen.

His aspirations are currently taking him to found a Union for deaf Arab citizens to offer opportunities for the 11 million Arab citizens with hearing loss. In the meantime, Dr Hussein has kindly accepted an interview to discuss the inclusion of his community in the ever-evolving world of technology.

### **D.A.N: How inclusive the world of technology towards signers?**

**H.I:** *“Our societies across the globe rely more and more on technology for the simplest routine tasks. Hence, the use and accessibility of devices and online software for the deaf is an absolute necessity. Digital technologies allow them to participate in society as full citizens and provide them with opportunities for personal and professional growth and interactions. Most commonly, the deaf use smartphones and personal computers.*

*Deaf people can work in the fields of graphic designs, web designs, computer programming, and so forth. Many community members have excellent visual and artistic tastes and can finally express their ideas with the support of digital systems. For the matter, any digital systems which use visual support are excellent for the Deaf.*

*The rise of multimedia tools has rendered communication more barrier-free for the deaf community. Using WhatsApp and Zoom calls has enabled signers to speak their first language: sign language with their hands. Multimedia also facilitates communication with many offline services such as visits to the doctors and other life chores, provided that an interpreter is available. Many softwares convert the voice of people into texts that deaf people can read. Otherwise, signers can use videos with other signers or people who speak their first language.*

*Speaking about texts, the world wide web is full of text information that is available and accessible to our community. When it comes to video clips, text captions are not always available. Hence, video content can be less handy relying only on motion images but not on sound.”*

### **D.A.N: How is the world of technology currently excluding signers?**

**H.I:** *“During the COVID19 pandemic, our community was very pleased with the amount of content about the new health crisis across social media. Many of the video contents were subtitled in sign language. It helped them feel part of the wider world and diminish their experience of social isolation.*

*Now, this is not the case for every piece of technology out there. There are no major differences between hearing and deaf people in terms of software unless the software requires auditory inputs.*

*Though barriers still exist in both hardware and software specifically in the ways online informational and instructional videos are recorded and streamed live is presented. No captions exist, and no interpreters are being provided. Other of those limitations may also be limited to a deaf person’s literacy in reading lips.*

*Such digital literacy is further restricted by the absence of technical terminology in sign language. Most terminologies were coined out in English. In that respect, both Arabic speakers and Arab signers are set on an equal foot. However, where Arabic speakers can usually translate an English word into Arabic, signers are somehow left behind. Terms such as smartphones, Ipad, Android, Apple, Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, Code (password), Chat, Online, were recently developed into sign language. Yet, many words such as Teams, Webex, IP address, etc., are not developed. Deaf persons use the manual alphabet to spell these unavailable signs.*

*Often, terminologies in sign language are developed by elite deaf persons across the broader spectrum of social classes in Lebanon. When one person suggests*

*a given new sign, others need to agree with this new sign, and it is automatically used in social media, where all deaf persons will eventually learn from this new term."*

**D.A.N: What are the consequences of such exclusion?**

**H.I:** *"Our interest as a community is to support deaf people who live with modern times. Otherwise, deaf people easily experience isolation, dependence, and a strong feeling of discrimination. All this alters the mental well-being of our fellow citizens. As technology has replaced almost everything, it is important to understand that such exclusion leads to low educational attainment, low levels of general literacy, low accessibility to the job market, and poor economic prospects. The bottom line is: No technology can help deaf people unless these technologies are fully functional."*

**D.A.N: What are you concretely doing at the Learning Center for the Deaf to support the signers' community with the world of technology?**

**H.I:** *"The LCD covers many aspects of a deaf person's life which our societies overlook or shows little interest in. We bring psychology, education, communication, and community to the table. A quite empty table in Lebanon and the Arab World, to be frank. The LCD is the first actor in Lebanon to work primarily in the fields of rehabilitation, empowerment, and advocacy."*

*The use of technology is an integral part of our learning curriculum. We use PowerPoint and other visual tools as well. During the pandemic, students attended their lessons on Zoom. One of our proudest achievements is that we have opened high school classes and have seen many of our students achieve high education degrees, a first breakthrough in the whole of Lebanon. What differentiates us is that we approach education for deaf people as a right, not as an act of welfare. And most beautiful of all is that our school includes hearing people who interact with their fellow deaf students. In the diversification of the classroom, we can also advocate for more inclusion."*

